

April 26, 2020

Third Sunday of Easter

Rev. Annie Pierpoint Mertz, Preacher

Sermon Preached via Facebook Live

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Benicia

Acts 2:14a, 36-41

Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17

1 Peter 1:17-29

Luke 24:13-35

One day, in my Grandmommy's apartment in Florida, I learned a lesson about love.

Ever since I could remember we would go visit at least once a year, and everything was exactly the same. There was the day at the beach, the day at the aquarium to see snooty the manatee, and a visit to the "One Stop Shell Shop" for precious souvenirs, like turtles made out of shells, hot glue, and googly eyes. We ate at the same restaurants, we felt utter devastation the year that Morrison's cafeteria closed up shop.

Grandmommy and Granddaddy's apartment was always the same too -- the mint green walls, the cat-shaped throw pillow, my dad's work from art school. The only thing that changed from year to year were the pictures of my sister and I that my mom mailed her.

A couple years after Granddaddy died, I noticed a bouquet of fake red roses on top of the T.V. They had been there for years, but I never really looked at them. They weren't anything special, really, except that someone had taken the time to drop blobs of clear glue on them so they appeared to be misted with fresh dew. So I asked Grandmommy -- where did these come from?

Before I tell you, you need to know one thing about my Grandmommy. Even though she spoiled us rotten when we came to visit, she had a fierce depression-era frugality her whole life. As a young woman, she left the family

farm in Virginia to live with an aunt and work as a secretary in Washington, D.C. She sent back every cent that she could. Even when I knew her, she re-used the tops of her stockings as rubber bands. Most of her kitchen appliances were from the 70s, and she wore the same outfit on Christmas eve for at least 30 years.

So, understandably, the Valentine's day my granddaddy came home with a beautiful bouquet of roses, Grandmommy was livid. "Why would you spend money on *flowers*," she cried? "They'll die in a few days. And you know the florists mark up the prices on Valentine's day."

"Frances," he said. "Take a closer look." The flowers had done their job -- they thoroughly fooled her, glue dewdrops and all. And she absolutely loved them. She absolutely loved him. And so, the flowers got pride of place, on top of the T.V. 'til the end of time. I don't think she ever got a Valentine's day bouquet again, and it suited her just fine.

The lesson I learned about love is that my granddaddy loved my grandmommy so much that he bought her fake roses on Valentine's day and never got her flowers again.

Now, if I had told you the lesson without the story, you'd think I was crazy. He bought fake flowers on Valentine's day and never bought another bouquet? That's your deep and profound lesson about love?

In the first days of the church, the disciples had an awkward, crazy-sounding lesson about love too. That God so loved the world that he sent his only son to die violently and tragically, and to come back from the dead. And that somehow, this means that all our sins have been erased. I can imagine the crowds scratching their heads. Couldn't God just have sent a good harvest to show his love? Or maybe a cow to feed my family? Today we might ask, well, God, couldn't you have just sent flowers?

You can't teach lessons like these -- lessons about deep, abiding love -- in a bible verse or a soundbite. You have to tell the whole story.

Consider this verse from first Peter: "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish." It sounds like gibberish! But we know the whole story. We know about the futile ways, about how God said all creation was good. How we lost our way and God kept finding us, delivering our ancestors from slavery, sustaining them through deserts and wars and famines and exile. We know that our ancestors sacrificed -- or gave up to God -- their most precious possessions, like unblemished lambs, to achieve God's forgiveness.

So it makes sense that the writer of first Peter says that Christ was the guy who gave up to God something so valuable that it paid for all the damage and destruction humanity had done and would ever do in the future. It sounds absolutely crazy on the surface, but because we know the story it makes sense.

Those people listening to Peter's first sermon in Acts thought he was crazy -- drunk, to be precise -- but after they heard the whole story 3,000 of them believed and were baptized. They needed to hear the whole story of salvation, not just the lesson.

I think sheltering at home has made ME a little crazy, because I actually thought this week that St. Paul's could do our own "walk to Emmaus." By way of Columbus Parkway, it's about 7 miles from the Church to the Costco in Vallejo. We could start our walk at Genesis 1:1 and tell the stories of our faith as we walked, perhaps getting into some spicy theological debates. We'd get to the passion and crucifixion as we entered the parking lot. Once we made it to the food court, we could do a short eucharist, and then, that same hour, we'll turn around and walk back to church so we can tell EVERYONE on First Street that the Lord has risen indeed and we saw him at Costco!

It is because we have heard the whole story that when we hear strange words like ransom and blood and lamb, we hear that God loves us to pieces. It is because we know the story of the walk to Emmaus, we might do something crazy like a 7-mile hike to Costco only to turn around and walk back and love every minute of it. It is because I knew the story of my Grandmommy's life -- where she came from and the sacrifices she made -- that I could see deep, abiding love in a dusty bouquet of fake flowers with glued-on dew sitting on a TV.

Take the time to read the story. Take time to tell the story. It's how we come to learn and know the strangest lesson of all -- that God loves us.

It sounds weird. As weird as an incarnate God, walking around earth in our shoes. As crazy as a man rising from the dead, or a woman loving a guy who bought her fake flowers on Valentine's day. As strange as a person holding out hope for the world when all seems lost.

And in some ways, that lesson hasn't aged well. Reading 1 Peter with modern eyes, it's hard to understand that we were "ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish."

Walk to Costco via Columbus Parkway = 7 miles

1 Peter is written to people who may be uncomfortable with their Christian identity

Ransom, blood, unblemished lamb, it's almost like it needs translation.

Acts - cut to the heart

1 Peter - Love deeply from the heart

Luke - Heart burns

The Word cuts, it burns the heart.

Love bites. Love bleeds. - Def Leppard, 1987.

Silver and Gold -- tortured, torn from the earth, ripped and refined, and it becomes a metal that is pretty, but not necessarily sturdy. God paid with something more useful.

Tertullian:

It is only after it has been tearfully wrought by penal labour in the deadly laboratories of accursed mines, and there left its name of "earth" in the fire behind it, that, as a fugitive from the mine, it passes from torments to ornaments, from punishments to embellishments, from ignominies to honours.

At all events, neither is the field tilled by means of gold, nor the ship fastened together by the strength of silver. No mattock plunges a golden edge into the ground; no nail drives a silver point into planks. I leave unnoticed the fact that the needs of our whole life are dependent upon iron and brass

Grandmommy and the fake roses. Granddaddy showed his love with something practical, useful.

Love is cutting us to the heart. It is love that keeps us separate from one another. Love for the stranger.

We were ransomed by the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. Makes sense in their culture, where animal sacrifice is common, where unblemished lambs are valued. That doesn't resonate.

What if we were ransomed by the precious love of Christ, a love like the embrace of an old friend who knows you to your core.

Turns out you're loved, despite all your best efforts. Amen.